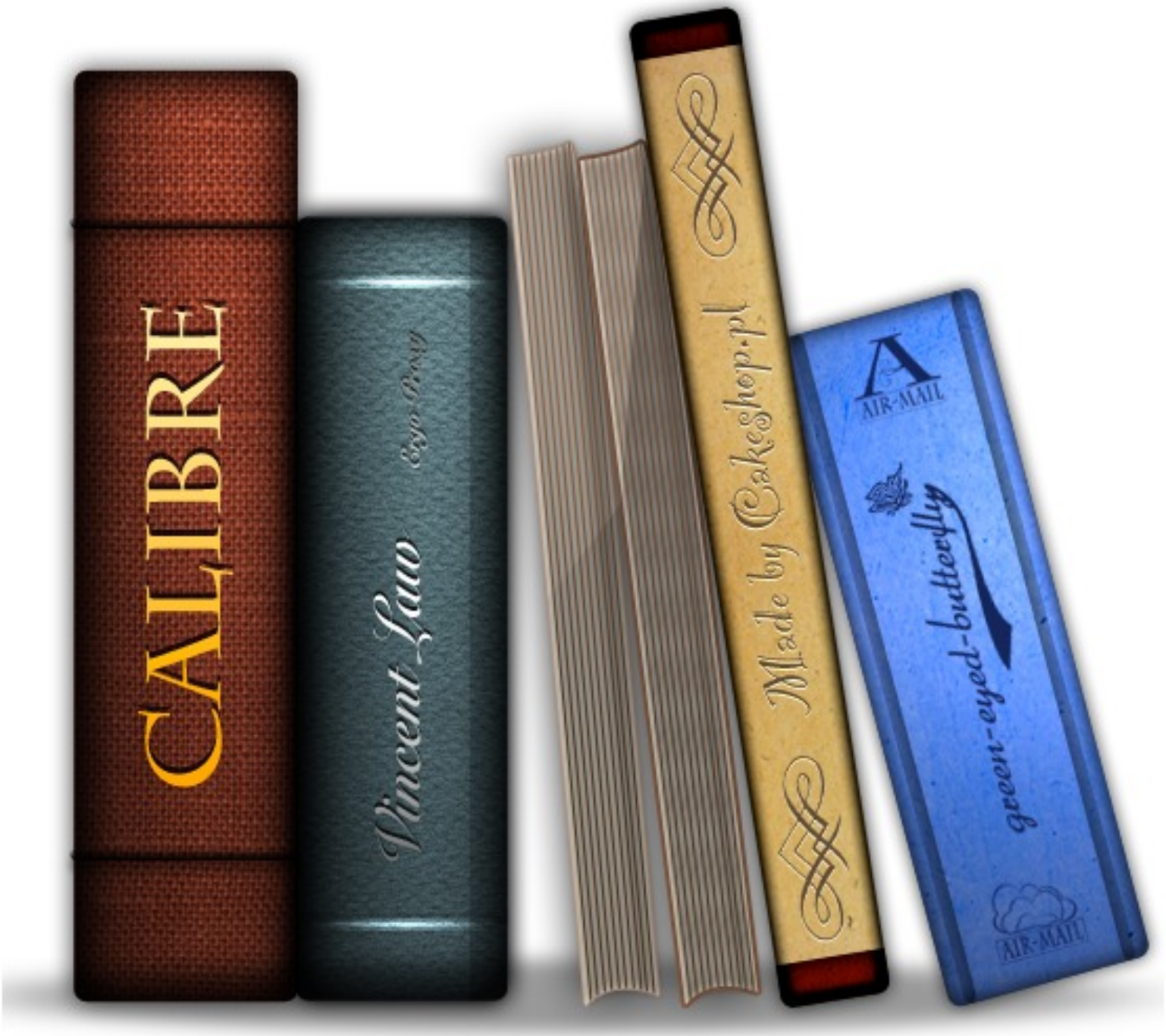
Tanith Lee

Snow-Drop



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CRISTENA'S HUSBAND LEFT HER AFTER A MONTH OF marriage, and went away on business to a distant country. She had known, when she married him, that this would be the arrangement, that she would frequently be alone. Her function was to live in the handsome house above the lake, like the blue center of a clockwork eye. The house cleaned and scented itself, cooked meals to order from the groceries which were delivered twice a week, did the laundry, even kept the sweep of garden, pruning the trees, digging the earth and planting, and offering up cut irises and denim roses to match Cristena's bright blue clothes. Cristena, her blond hair wound about her head, was a physically lazy, mentally active woman. She liked to read, watch television, listen to music, and sometimes she would write a slim wild novel without any effort, which would sell well for a year or two, and then slip from view. The house suited her ideally. She had always wanted such a house, and such a life. Even the long absences of her husband were actually perfect. They left her time for herself, and would give every homecoming excitement, every leave-taking the drama of high romance.

However.

Before he had married Cristena, her husband had lived in the house with another woman. This woman, some years his senior, had been dark, passionate, and energetically creative, an artist. She had died alone in the house, under rather dubious circumstances of wine and pills. She left behind no trace of her being, for the house had fastidiously washed and redecorated itself after the funeral and given her clothes and treasures to charities. All that remained were some small watercolor paintings, very graceful and fine, and in fact worth quite an amount of money, for the artist had been highly esteemed. These paintings were to be found in every room, along every corridor. The subject was virtually the same in each: a young girl, about fourteen years of age. She was slender and eloquent, sometimes depicted sitting and sometimes standing, often in an expanse of pure snow. Her skin was white as that snow, and her long smooth hair was black as wood. She had a pale red mouth.

At first Cristena barely noticed the paintings. They did not interest her very much—she preferred landscapes—and besides were all so alike that it seemed if you had looked at one you need never look at any of the others.

As the summer days passed, though, the lake darkened and the birches in the garden turned mellow; the coldness of the pictures, like little oblongs of winter brought indoors, began to annoy Cristena. They ached at the edge of her eyes, distracting her from her books and her Shostakovich. In the roomy passageways, they waited like white sentinels. They reflected in mirrors, duplicating themselves. They were even in the bedroom. Cristena removed them from there and hung instead two warm violet prints of hills.

The initial homecoming of Cristena's husband was not so astonishing as she had thought it would be.

He brought her a sapphire ring, which was very nice, although it did not quite fit. But rather than ardent, he was tired and irascible. He spoke of business throughout their candlelit dinner. In bed, he kissed her, turned away and fell unconscious. He snored. Cristena found she could not sleep. Near morning, when she had managed to doze, her husband woke her with insistent lasciviousness. He made love to her in a sort of drunken somnambulism, and while he did not hurt or distress her, he gave her no pleasure either. He fell asleep again on her breast, and she almost smothered until eventually she had prised herself out from under him. She achieved an hour's slumber on the brink of the mattress, where his bulk had gradually pushed her, for he too, apparently, was more used to sleeping alone.

At breakfast, a very ornate and sparkling one she had arranged for the house to prepare, Cristena's husband read papers and documents and made verbal notes on his pocket recorder.

Finally he looked up.

"Where are her paintings from the bedroom?"

"Oh, I didn't think you'd seen… I took them down.

The prints are much more in keeping with the colors of the room."

"Maybe, but not a hundredth the value. She was famous, you know."

It was only in this way that he ever referred to his previous liaison, her fame. He did not like to discuss her as a person.

"Well, if you want," said Cristena, "I can put them back. Personally—"

"Yes, I'd prefer that."

Irritated, Cristena said, to irk him in turn, "They're all the same, aren't they. That girl. Self-portraits?"

Her husband grunted. "She wanted children," he said.

"You mean it's the fantasy portrait of a daughter she couldn't have?"

He frowned and did not reply.

He was quite ugly in the morning, Cristena thought, and he had put on weight which did not suit him.

She took the two pictures of the artist's unborn daughter out of the house storage and set them back on the bedroom wall. Now she stared at them a long time. They had assumed *a* macabre importance, expressions of barren desire. No wonder they were capable of projecting such a horrid animation of their own.

That night Cristena wore her hair loose and a low-necked dress of midnight blue. Her husband seemed bemused, but nevertheless he made love to her on the rug before the fire, knocking over a brandy glass in the process, which the following day the house would have to clean with an odorless acid preparation. Cristena found after all that she was not going to enjoy this sexual union any more than the first. In contempt, she pretended, and her husband floundered into a relieved climax. In bed they both swallowed sleeping capsules. Cristena woke at dawn with the white pictures shining above her head like two slices of ice, and all the covers pulled off her, leaving her peculiarly vulnerable in the draftless room.

Cristena's husband spent only ten days at the house before he had to leave the country again. On the afternoon of his departure Cristena did indeed weep. They were tears of nervous thankfulness. But he was enraged by the scene, shouting that he did not want a clinging vine. He would be gone five months.

In the weeks which followed, winter came. The garden and the landscape, the road which led to the city, and up which the delivery vehicle still beat its way on heated runners, turned snow white. The lake froze to a silver tray. The daylight shrank, and by night the sky flickered with luminescent coils of phantom hair.

The house was of a faultless temperature, airy and bright, all its mechanisms performing helpfully. But Cristena began to feel threatened. She was anxious, and found it difficult, for the first time in her life, to concentrate on her books and music. A novel she had begun grew sluggish and contrived, and she left it.

She tried not to look at the pictures of the artist's unborn child, but they glowed on the walls and in the mirrors. A snow girl, nivea skin and ebony tresses and red water-ice mouth. As Cristena sat in the rooms of the house, she felt the pictures watching her, and when she walked through the corridors, the pictures blinked past like eyes.

Cristena removed the two pictures from the bedroom again, and the larger picture from her bathroom, and all the pictures from the living room. She put them into the house storage and ordered other pictures from a catalogue, and hung up those.

But now it seemed to be too late. The artist's paintings had left an imprint on the atmosphere of the rooms where they had hung, and in the places where they hung still they seemed to have amassed a greater strength.

The winter light, too, which shone in penetratingly through all the clear windows, left drops of whiteness as if fresh watercolors hung there.

There was nobody to talk to. This had never before mattered.

Cristena took down all the paintings, every one, and put them into the storage. The blank marks on the walls where they had been glimmered like candles.

Cristena kept the blinds lowered and the curtains drawn, and the lights burned day and night, and the television fluttered and sang in every space. She had to be stern with herself as she went along the passageways.

On the morning that it happened, Cristena was making up in her dressing room.

She had decided to travel to the city in an automatic hire car, to shop, eat her lunch in a restaurant, visit the theater. The idea of going among people nearly frightened her, she had been alone so long, but she was also exhilarated, and she had poured a little vodka into her tea.

The dressing room was very attractive to Cristena. It was hyacinth with accents of gold. In the tall cupboards hung elegant dresses her husband had bought her, and in the drawers, folded among perfumes, lay undergarments of bone and lace, stockings embroidered with flowers, erotic items that once she had put on eagerly to please him when he had been her lover. Cristena ignored these articles, as she ignored the jewels her husband had given her, especially the sapphire ring which was too small and so almost insulting.

She dressed her face carefully, and it was as she was applying her dark blue mascara that she glimpsed behind her—something. Something white and slim and girl-shaped, standing between the mirror and the wall, there, on the carpet, visible.

Cristena lowered the mascara with a painful slowness. She glared into the mirror through a blue hedge.

The snow girl was about three meters away, over Cristena's shoulder. She was quite distinct. She wore the same white, seamless, vaguely formfitting garment as in the paintings, matched by her snowy skin. The long glissade of hair was wood-black; her lips were red.

Cristena screamed. She jumped up and spun around.

The room was empty of the artist's unborn child. Only a white gown gleamed from a half-open door, with a mass of dark shadow above and a transparent scarlet rose sewn on its sleeve.

Swinging sharply back, Cristena took up a steel ornament and smashed the mirror. Fragments of glass tore off and flew about the room. The house would clear it all up.

Cristena pulled the white dress off its peg and crumpled it into the disposal chute. It was carried away with a disapproving hiss.

She was trembling but angry. She realized the anger had lain dormant in her and now sought release. She ran out of the dressing room, through the bedroom, along the passage and down the stairs. All the way, flashing razor glimpses, like a migraine attack, assailed her eyes—the spots where the pictures of the artist's daughter had hung.

When she reached the living room, Cristena pressed the button and the blinds flew up with the noise of furious wings.

Outside was the unearthly snow, and there in the garden under the birches stood the snow child, the dark of a pine her hair, a single red berry her mouth.

At that moment the door called tunefully.

Confused, Cristena flung up her head. There was no delivery expected today.

"What is it?"

"*A* man is at the door. He carries no weapons."

Cristena drifted in a trance into the hall and signaled the door to open. Beyond the security bar stood a large and powerful young man, who beamed at her. He was incredibly ordinary, and real. Cristena had no notion who he was or what he was doing there, but her awareness fixed on him voraciously. He was here for a purpose: hers.

"Lady," he said directly, "I'm a photo-hunter. Look at this."

And into the hallway over the bar leapt a wolf, which stood looking at her with its beautiful eyes. It was a holostet the young man had constructed from photographs taken in the woods on the far side of the lake, so he explained. It could be hers for a reasonable sum. For a fraction extra, it could be fixed to run about the house and howl.

"I can't buy the wolf," said Cristena. The young man looked sorry. "But come in. There's something you can do."

After she had plied him with alcohol and resisted his amorous advances (which plainly were what he supposed she wanted), Cristena, lit by vodka and hot tea, had him pile up on the lawn the many watercolors of the artist's daughter. The house was programmed not to harm its own possessions, but he, with a large gardening implement, smashed these pictures and mashed them. After which, together, they burned them all, and the yellow flames rose glamorously into the winter sky. When it was done, not a crumb remained of the snow child, not a flake or shard. The young photo-hunter dug the snow over the black wound of the fire. Cristena gave him some money, and he went whistling away along the road with his holostetic wolf leaping about him.

And that was the end of it. The end.

And that night, Cristena's husband called from a sky-scraping mansion countless miles off, having clinched some deal. He was a little drunk, too.

"I've destroyed them," said Cristena. "All of them."

"Good. All of what?"

"The icons of her bloody child that she never had."

"What icons?"

Cristena shrieked into the phone: "The ice maiden. *Her pictures*. I burnt them."

Cristena's husband was in the wrong place to make a noisy fuss. He told her she had lost him thousands of international dollars. Cristena laughed. He should have, she said, all the royalties of her next novel.

When he had rung off, she put on a disc of Shostakovich and filled the house with it. She let the windows blaze toward the lake. She sat late working out a scenario for the house to redecorate itself *again*, in saffron and blue. All the furniture should be moved around, and she would buy new drapes in the city. When her husband returned, he would wonder where he was.

*

In two weeks the house was changed to a gas flame, azure and yellow. There were new pictures and prints in all the corridors and rooms. Cristena had spent two or three days in the city, choosing blueberry and primrose curtains. The contact with people, of whom the photo-hunter had been the herald, hardened and revived her. At length she was ready to withdraw again into her mental vase of music, books and television.

Outside, the world stayed obdurately white, the lake shiny black beneath its ice. Cristena had had the berries stripped off all the bushes.

Cristena had almost finished her novel, the first part of which she had limpidly and easily rewritten. She sat working on the re-upholstered couch, her back supported by flaxen cushions. The television fluted faintly in the corner of the room. Something about the picture summoned Cristena's attention, and she looked up. Snow had filled the screen. It was utterly white. Cristena frowned. She was about to press the adjustment control when the whiteness opened out into a petal, and so into a single flower, and then the camera sprang back to reveal a girl dressed in white and holding the white flower. She bowed low, and her long black hair, smooth as poured ink, fell forward to the ground. Cristena sat bolt upright, and her writing smacked on the carpet. Without knowing what she did, she turned up the volume.

"And here is Snow-Drop," said the voice of the television, "one of the stars of the circus."

The girl wore a short white costume and white tights that covered her from neck to toe to wrist, but described every inch of her young pliancy. The whiteness was corruscated by spangles. When she sprang suddenly over in a somersault, she glittered like a firework and her hair sprayed out in fantastic smoke.

Seven small figures ran across the space, which seemed to be that of a large arena. They wore red and black. Cristena thought they were children, but their thick dark hair, muscular faces and forearms enlightened her. They were dwarfs. They formed a pyramid and tumbled down, rolling expertly to the white satin feet of the girl called Snow-Drop. She then arched over backward, making a hoop, and they trotted in a train under her. Next they lifted her up high and raced along carrying her, in the way ants carry a leaf.

There was a familial resemblance. Cristena wondered if Snow-Drop was related to the dwarfs. Although perfectly proportioned, she was very slight and petite. She looked about fourteen years old.

The dwarfs set Snow-Drop down. She coiled herself up into a cross-legged snake, while her seven companions bounced into position about her. In tableau, the dwarfs grinned. They had poised, good-looking faces and seemed quite composed and happy with their lot. The girl also smiled.

This image was replaced by a garish sign, the fiery neon of the circus, which was performing in the city. Snow-Drop and the dwarfs were to be seen every night.

The television reverted to a rather sedentary play.

Cristena switched it off.

She walked uneasily about the room, feeling a strange, excited dread. It was as if she herself had conjured up Snow-Drop in the mirror of the television. As if, by breaking and burning Snow-Drop's image, she, Cristena, who had never wanted children, had given Snow-Drop life. For Snow-Drop was the artist's unborn daughter, correct in each detail, even to her pale red mouth.

Every evening, for several nights, the same advertisement came on the television, and Cristena watched it. Sometimes other circus acts were shown as well, a man who swallowed clocks, a woman who danced extravagantly on the head of a pole. But Snow-Drop was always there, bowing, somersaulting, making herself into an arch, being carried by the ant-like dwarfs, sitting in their midst. Beyond her name, which was probably false anyway, no information was given.

It seemed to Cristena that a net had been cast for her and that slowly she was being pulled in to a snowy shore. It was useless to dissemble. She knew she would eventually go to the city, to the circus. There was even a vague fear that if she delayed too long, the circus might have moved on and she would have missed it. At last this fear got the better of her.

An automatic hire car drove her along the frozen road, back into the icicled city, and delivered her at the entrance of the theater where the circus was resident.

Cristena took a gilded seat at the front of the auditorium. She was nervous, and as the spangled performers swung or pirouetted or leapt past, she imagined they stared recognizingly into her face with eyes as cruel as knives.

When the moment came for Snow-Drop's act with the seven dwarfs, Cristena was trembling, and she took some large gulps from a golden flask.

The dwarfs came springing out like seven sable cats. Snow-Drop appeared ethereally, wafted down on wires from the ceiling. She was dressed like a princess, in a long alabaster gown and diamanté tiara. But she peeled off the dress and wires to reveal her sequined second skin, and turned a series of cartwheels. At each revolution she went by one of the dwarfs, who in turn began to cartwheel. The eight forms twirled about each other until Cristena was giddy and shut her eyes.

When she opened them again the dwarfs were busy raising a body mountain up which Snow-Drop walked, and next they became a body sea on which she swam.

The dwarfs made Snow-Drop the axis of every pattern. They were landscapes over which she traveled and buildings into which she went and from whose windows she looked out. By prancing off each other's shoulders, they made her seem to juggle them— the audience laughed and clapped—and at one point they became an animal, a dwarf for each leg and three dwarfs composing a body, head and waving tail. Snow-Drop sat on its back as it cantered to and fro, at last rearing up and catapulting her away into a scintillant triple spin.

Unlike all the other acts, neither the dwarfs nor Snow-Drop seemed ever to glance into Cristena's face. As they went through their plasticene antics, their eyes were fixed wide and brilliant and far away.

Cristena's nervousness gradually left her. She observed the acrobats with condescending interest. She began to want them to notice her. She wanted beautiful Snow-Drop, white and black and red, to look at her, to *know* her. It was not possible realization should be only on one side. It occurred to Cristena they were actually ignoring her, cutting her, but that of course was absurd.

Finally there was a *danse macabre*, during which three of the dwarfs stood on each other to fashion a tall man, with whom Snow-Drop waltzed. But Snow-Drop grew dizzy and fell down and died. The dwarfs bore her to the center of the stage, where they described a funeral, and buried her in their dark bodies. Then a spotlight sun shone on the mound, and a white shoot pierced up through the earth of dwarfs. Snow-Drop dived in graceful slow motion up into the air and was reborn like her name flower, to great applause.

As they bowed, Cristena stared at them, the seven handsome dwarfs and Snow-Drop. But their faces were like enamel masks. When they darted off the stage, anger flushed through Cristena, hotter than the vodka in her flask.

Soon after, she was outside the theater, standing back among some bare trees below the Stage Door, while across the street the hire car waited like an obedient ghost.

A group of other people had also gathered here, and a number of children with autograph books. Artists emerged and were beaming and gracious. Presently the dwarfs came out all together in wonderful fake fur coats. They were jolly, and teased the patrons and scared the children. In the streetlamps their eyes were now wicked and wise. Long after they had gone, when the autograph hunters had become impatient and many drifted away, Snow-Drop emerged. Unlike the dwarfs, she wore a skimpy black jacket and ankle boots. Her hair was done in a long plait. She spoke to her admirers solemnly and signed their books quickly, like a thief. Cristena watched, and wondered what she would do. But when Snow-Drop's fans had melted away, she walked directly down toward the trees. Cristena stepped out as if on cue.

"Hallo, how are you? Perhaps you remember me?"

Snow-Drop did not seem startled although she had halted at once. In fact, an immediate slyness was apparent, a vixenish glaze of evaluation passing over her eyes. Then she smiled without opening her mouth and shook her head.

"Your mother…" said Cristena. She added patronizingly, "You would have been too young to recall."

"I'm older than I look," said Snow-Drop primly. Her voice was flat and unpolished, and the statement offered its own obscure meaning, redolent of something murky.

"Well, would you like to see the house?" said Cristena boldly. She had planned nothing, but the words came as simply as in one of her novels.

"The house? Your house?"

"Yes, naturally mine. And we can have some wine, and perhaps dinner. The kitchen's fully automated."

"That would be nice," said Snow-Drop, in her cheap little voice. Only the under-pavement heating must have kept her slim legs from the cold in that short skirt and those unsuitable boots.

Cristena walked across the road, and Snow-Drop followed her neatly, docilely. Under the lamps her face was exactly the face of the paintings, and her mouth had been lipsticked an even redder red.

There was no one left by the Stage Door, the street was empty, and Cristena did not think anyone had seen Snow-Drop come with her to the car. She was glad, for after all Snow-Drop was a little embarrassing. Yet, as the car drove them away into the countryside, Snow-Drop's awful loveliness filled the atmosphere like a low buzzing. Cristena felt the need to talk. She lied sumptuously.

"Your mother was very fond of you. I haven't seen her for so long."

Without protest or overt cunning, Snow-Drop announced, "I never knew my mother. I was brought up by the troupe."

"Are you close to them, the seven—"

"Oh, they don't like me," said Snow-Drop, reasonably.

The house glowed at them from across the lake, and when the car brought them to the door, extra lights flamed on in welcome. Cristena could see Snow-Drop was impressed. A nasty complacency had thinned her lips.

They went into the living room. Here, where the watercolors had hung in such abundance, Snow-Drop made a living sculpture. Cristena tensed for the house to respond in some way. But, when it did not, when no poltergeist activity of any sort took place, she decided that she had already exorcised the architecture.

They drank a fresh yellow wine.

Cristena asked Snow-Drop questions about her life, and rather to her surprise Snow-Drop responded without either reticence or verbosity. She laid out events in bleak rows before Cristena. It was a sordid, unjoyful existence which Snow-Drop led, out of all keeping with her looks. And it had made her mean and ordinary in spite of herself. She had not ascended to tragedy or grotesqueness, but plummeted to the mealymouthed and the dull. Only glints of acquisitiveness distinguished her, and it was obvious she reckoned she would get—was getting—something out of Cristena. Otherwise she dwelt in the shadow of the circus and especially of the dwarfs. She was their slave, seeing to their laundry by hand, shopping for and cooking their meals on those occasions they demanded it. Cristena suspected that Snow-Drop was also their sexual toy. For that matter, almost anyone's, maybe. There was a metallic fragrance of willingness, which grew stronger as the wine left the decanter and filled their bodies.

"Off-stage, do you always plait your hair?" asked Cristena.

"Shall I undo it?" asked Snow-Drop.

"Yes, why not? I've got a marvelous comb that perfumes the hair. We can go upstairs. I'll show you my dresses. You might like to choose some. They'd be too big for you, but we can always have them re-tailored."

They went up the stair and along a passage where the artist's paintings had hung, and into Cristena's dressing room.

Cristena threw open doors.

"Look, that crimson silk would suit you. My husband bought it. I never wear red. And this black one with sparkles."

With a studied unself-consciousness, Snow-Drop slipped off her tawdry skirt and top and stood in faded under-things, dim pants and tights, and since she did not wear a brassiere, only a thin little cotton bodice to conceal her bosom. Her acrobat's body was perfect, firm slim muscle lightly padded by white satin, and the symmetrical rounded young breasts bobbing in their vest. She tried on the dresses greedily. Cristena pinched in material to show how well they would suit Snow-Drop once they had been altered.

From its case she brought the magic comb and switched it on. When it had heated up, she combed Snow-Drop's amazingly long, tendrilly hair. A scent of warm roses, jasmine and cinnamon throbbed in the room. They drank more wine.

"There are some gorgeous underclothes, too," said Cristena. "I never use them."

She opened the drawers, and let fall a shower of black and white silk corsets, black stockings sewn with orchids, garters of crow lace with silver buckles.

With no apparent modesty or reluctance, Snow-Drop pulled off her drab tights and pants, and up over her delicate head in a whirlwind of hair went the inadequate bosom-bodice. She sat on a chair and drew the embroidered stockings along her dainty legs, and fixed on the garters. She flexed her thighs and her firm, curved stomach moved; her breasts quivered like smooth white birds. Cristena assisted her into the black corset shot with ivory silk. She fitted it around the swaying stem of body and tilted into the bone cups the birds of the breasts, so the candy pink tip of a nipple rose just above each frill. Cristena laced up the corset severely. "You must wear it tight."

Snow-Drop posed before the mirror. She raised her arms artlessly, and the pink sweets rose further from their black froth containers. Between the silky limbs, under the corset's ribboned border, Snow-Drop's private hair, dark and thick like the fur of a cat, seemed the blackest thing in the room.

"That's very pretty," said Cristena.

She felt heavy, languid, tingling, mad. She put her hands around Snow-Drop's body and made a small adjustment to the corset top. Her fingers brushed an icing-sugar nipple. Snow-Drop giggled.

"Now, you mustn't be ticklish," said Cristena. She tried the nipple again.

Snow-Drop squirmed, pressing back against her.

In the mirror Cristena saw the beautiful doll with its bosom popping from the frills, its hands-span waist, and its naked lower limbs, wriggling. Snow-Drop's eyes were shut and her red lips parted.

Cristena pulled the girl backward against her body. She caressed her breasts, sought the V of coal-black fur. She watched in the mirror. Snow-Drop writhed. She parted her legs and thrust her buttocks into Cristena's belly. She uttered tiny, shrill squeaks.

Fire engulfed Cristena. She pinioned Snow-Drop, rubbing, tickling, squeezing, choked by the perfume of roses and cinnamon, hair and skin, drunken and furious, and the girl was screaming, in the glass a demon of black and white and red.

Cristena felt the climax roll up between her thighs, turning her inner life, her soul, over and over in blind ecstasy, as Snow-Drop wailed in her grip and the room exploded.

When Cristena came to herself, Snow-Drop was sitting cross-legged on the floor. She sucked her thumb and played with the ribbons of the corset, like a spoiled child who knows it has been naughty, but that this will not matter.

Cristena told herself it would *not* matter, over and over again, as she assisted the kitchen in the preparation of a lavish supper. Never in her life had she experienced such alarm. It was not shame, more terror. For Snow-Drop came of a dangerous, scurrilous race. Who knew now what she might do? For the moment she sat on the couch, still in the corset and still half nude, drinking wine and looking at the television, in whose speculative lens she had first appeared. Later it was possible she might be persuaded to go back to the city. But then again she might want to spend the night here. And after tonight, how many other nights? What payment would she exact, in emotion or hard cash? How luminous her eyes as she glanced about her at the furnishings of Cristena's husband's house.

Cristena put the last touches to the food and drink. Her hands were shaking, but she pulled herself together and made herself survey what she had done. It was a meal of red, white and black, although she doubted Snow-Drop would take this in, let alone appreciate it. White soft rolls and creamy cheeses, slices of palest chicken in an almond sauce, caviar, fat grapes as black as agate, pomegranate seeds, burgundy apples whose crisp hearts were the shade of virgin ice. In the decanter, a rich ruby wine.

As she followed the service trolley into the living room, Cristena wished there had been someone to pray to. But there was not, she must deal with this herself.

"I hope you're hungry."

"Oh yes. I like my food," said Snow-Drop, who had looked as if she lived on honey-dew.

She began to eat at once; alcohol and orgasm had evidently stimulated her appetite.

Cristena observed. She was prepared to say, if pressed, "No, I had dinner earlier. You have it all." But Snow-Drop, gobbling up everything in a prissy yet vulture-like way, did not bother with Cristena, did not seem to notice that her hostess ate nothing.

As more and more of the food and wine were consumed, Cristena's shaking increased. When Snow-Drop plucked up one of the gleaming red apples, Cristena flinched. Of all of the feast, she was afraid she had taken a chance with the apples.

Snow-Drop put the apple to her mouth and bit into it. Then, quite slowly, her jaw dropped. Cristena saw inside her mouth, to the piece of white and red apple lying on Snow-Drop's tongue. Snow-Drop looked at Cristena, mildly inquiring. "Mmr," she said. Then her eyes turned up in their sockets and she slid from the couch to the carpet.

She lay there half an hour, motionless. Then there was a small spasm, which did not wake her. Crystal urine flowed out and wet the rug. A thread of scarlet slipped between Snow-Drop's lips. That was all. She was dead. She could not be anything else. Cristena had crushed twenty tasteless, soluble sleeping capsules in the wine, and in the sauces, meat, fish, cheese and fruit had gone the odorless soft corrosive cleaning acids of the house, the unsmelling garden pesticides. She had burnished the apples with a vitriolic substance employed to polish the mirrors.

The house buried Snow-Drop's body without any difficulty in the garden. After the job had been done, the digger took up deep snow from the lawn and packed it in above the grave. But in any case that night new snow came down and covered everything.

If there were reports on the television of Snow-Drop's disappearance, Cristena, who studied the screen closely, did not see them.

Presumably no one knew where Snow-Drop had gone on the night of her vanishment, and perhaps ultimately nobody cared. The seven dwarfs had not liked her and would probably find it challenging to locate and train another beautiful lost child as their helpmeet and victim.

Cristena felt no compunction. She had had to protect herself. She settled down and completed her novel, then put it into the machine to be typed. By the time her husband returned to the house, the book would be in the hands of her publishers, and she could present him with the advance, which would humiliate him.

He came home some weeks early, when the snow was still down across the landscape. Calling her from the airport, he told her that he was bringing two of his business associates, and in the background she heard their hearty, stupid and inebriated voices. Cristena was not pleased, but she made believe she did not mind, sure he would bring the men to upset her and she could ruin his trick by seeming unconcerned.

She went about the house behind the automatic dusters. For months she had thought of it mostly as hers. She did not suppose he would like the new color scheme, and he was capable of having it changed. Cristena braced herself to be merry and careless.

The men arrived in the afternoon and came swaggering up to the house. Her husband was in the lead. He had put on yet more weight, and she had never seen him look so ugly, as if he had done it on purpose.

For an hour or so the male colleagues sprawled in the living room, eating things the kitchen prepared and drinking beer. Cristena's husband had greeted her with affectionate disinterest and now largely ignored her, but he had not remarked adversely on the redecoration. Indeed, he abruptly praised it. "The house is looking good. But wait until you see what I've brought for the garden." And somehow he made it obvious he had deliberately not brought a present for Cristena, who did not deserve one, but for the house.

They went outside, into the freezing, twilit day.

With the help of the house porter, Cristena's husband trundled a large lamp-like structure into the garden and set it up among the birch trees. He threw a switch and the lamp began softly to hum. From its bowl a yellow light streamed out and bathed the slope. It became warm. Strange scents shot from the ground, the trees. They were the smells of spring.

"The snow will be gone in minutes," said Cristena's husband. "The plants start coming up in half an hour. You can have a spring and summer garden in the middle of winter. Expensive, I'll admit, this sunlamp, but wait till you see."

They waited, and they saw. And presently, after they had been splashed with snow and mud from the broiling, roiling earth, they retreated into the living room and looked on from there.

The garden was in flux, in tumult. Snow rushed in avalanches from the trees and along the ground. A kind of seismic activity thrust up huge tumuli, which seemed to boil. And on these peculiar black mounds, the porcelain flowers of spring bubbled through.

"You see?" asked Cristena's husband excitedly.

Cristena did. It was only a matter of time, and already she was leaden and self-possessed.

Finally, after only twenty minutes, sabotaged by the sunlamp, the lid of dense snow had melted off and the sides of the grave gave way. The upheaval in the earth pushed from below, and Snow-Drop came out once more from the dark.

The cryogenic cold had preserved her flawlessly. The pressure on her spine made her sit slowly up in the grave to the astonished wonder of the three gaping men. And she was as ever white as snow, black as wood, and her pale red mouth opened and the bit of apple, also exactly preserved, fell out. And so she sat there exquisitely, with her lips parted and her eyes closed, dead as a doornail, until the men turned to Cristena with their questions.

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